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ABSTRACT

Noting that role playing and writing as prereading activities have the potential to improve reading comprehension, a study tested the efficacy of a role playing method for improving reading comprehension. Students in three college developmental reading classes were asked to assume the role of author of a selection that they were about to read and then write like that author, while students in three additional classes functioned as a control group. The Nelson-Denny Reading Test was administered at the end of the semester, and an analysis of the results revealed that the gains made by the experimental group were not significantly greater than those of the control group. However, the experimental students were more successful in answering inference questions, their scores on the retention measure approached statistical significance, and they exceeded the control group in answering the essay test questions. The method did appear to help students comprehend the reading and offered an opportunity to discover what information and preconceptions students bring to a reading. (Tables of findings are included.) (SRT)

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Writing before Reading: A Role-Playing Model

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Running head: WRITING BEFORE READING

Abstract

This article acquaints instructors with a prereading writing activity to aid the comprehension of underprepared college students. The method involves asking students to "role-play" and write like the author of a reading selection before they read the selection. Teachers place students in a writing situation which foreshadows a particular reading, and students are asked to write on the content and in the form of the selection that they are about to read. The presentation of the results of a study carried out with three reading selections demonstrates and measures the effect of the role-playing method. Experimental students achieved significantly better in several areas.

WRITING BEFORE READING: A ROLE-PLAYING MODEL

Since reading and writing are interrelated skills, it is logical to teach them in conjunction and allow reading and writing activities to be mutually reinforcing. Stotsky (1982) has recently reviewed the role of writing in teaching developmental reading and concluded that in all of the writing activities that she identified, writing was used after students had completed a reading. That is, students are usually directed to read a selection; then a writing, such as a summary, is assigned as a means of exploring or analyzing the selection.

Another direction to explore in the use of writing to teach reading is to use writing as a prereading activity. The theoretical basis for this practice has been well-argued. Chomsky (1971) observes that young children are developmentally ready to write before they are ready to read. She argues that the impulse to communicate, which is first manifested in oral speech, can easily be transferred into writing. Wilson (1981) cites several researchers who maintain that children learn their reading strategies from experiences as writers.

(1968)

James Moffett has long held that writing should precede reading, for writing enables students to become better readers. In fact, Moffett believes that comprehension problems are due to students' inexperience with writing. He explains that students must be familiar with the writing process so that they can understand

the choices that an author makes. He maintains that students must do "role-playing" as authors in order to become good readers (Moffett, 1981, p. 68).

Moffett's insistence on the primacy of writing experiences and his contention that comprehension requires the reader to role-play the author suggested to us a specific writing technique for reading comprehension. We asked the students in our college developmental reading classes to take on the role of author and attempt to write like the author of a selection that they were about to read. The teacher placed the students in a writing situation which foreshadowed a particular reading. Students faced the problems of an author before actually encountering the text, the problems of recalling, selecting, and arranging experiences and ideas for an assumed reader. The students wrote on the topic and in the format of an author that they were about to read. We hoped that the attempt to communicate their own thoughts about the topic would predispose the students to notice the cues offered by the author in the ensuing reading.

Study

A study was designed to test the efficacy of the role-playing method. The subjects of the study were six classes of students enrolled in remedial reading courses. All classes met for 150 minutes each week for a fourteen-week semester. Three classes

were assigned to the experimental group and took part in the role-playing activity. The other three classes read the same selections, had similar discussions, and took the same tests but did not take part in the role-playing writing activity. Descriptive data collected on all students included race, sex, and Nelson-Denny Reading Test pretest scores. Three reading instructors agreed to take part in the study, and each instructor taught one experimental and one control class.

Procedures

For the study, we decided on three role-playing writings as an adequate number to test the method in individual selections and as a minimum number of interventions that could begin to affect long-term comprehension. Thus the method was tried in three different situations represented by three readings.

A general procedure for presenting each reading was established. First, instructors held a discussion directed toward bringing to mind any thoughts or impressions the student had about the topic, adding to his store of information, and stimulating his thought processes. A vocabulary preview was provided for any words that might prove difficult for students. The experimental group then received a role-playing writing assignment which was to be accomplished before the students read the selection.

The most challenging aspect of adopting the role-playing method

was the creation of the specific writing assignments that would prepare students for the readings. We followed two basic guidelines. First, the assignments had to be designed so that they would compel the students to call upon their own experiences and feelings about the topic of the reading selection. We were trying to foster a sense of "connection" with the author. We hoped that dealing with the topic in terms of their own thoughts and experiences would prepare the students to meet and incorporate into their own schemata the reflections of the author that they were about to read.

Secondly, the writing assignment had to address the reading, guiding the students toward overcoming the special problems that each reading presents. The problems that a particular reading can present to a student are myriad, but there are two general sources for problems. The difficulty may result from an inability to employ strategies required for a particular type of discourse. For example, persuasive discourse is often difficult for students. They have not yet learned to deal with such elements as emotional appeal and authorial bias. Difficulty may also stem from an individual student's preconception about the theme of the discourse. Students who are violently opposed to a proposition that they meet in a reading usually react with an emotional rejection. Inexperienced students often allow these biases to blind them to the facts and arguments of the text they are reading. The three writing assignments which were created for the reading selections chosen

for this study represent an attempt to distill from the selection its most pressing problem for students and to address that problem.

Three testing procedures were used to measure the results of the role-playing intervention. An alternate form of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test was administered at the end of the semester to determine if the writing treatment had affected overall reading achievement. In addition, to measure comprehension of the three partiuclar selections inlcuded for the study, the students also took a test on each reading. Two of the three reading selections appeared in the textbook used in the courses and were accompanied by objective comprehension questions on retention and inference. A similar test was constructed for the third reading.

The third measure used was an essay test question devised for each reading. The essay test questions attempted to assess whether or not the prereading writing assignments had accomplished their goal. Thus, if the goal of the writing had been to increase retention of the content of the reading, the essay question would tap students' retention. If the goal of the role-playing assignment had been to help students detect bias in the reading selection, the essay test question sought to evaluate that aspect. The essay question varied for each reading according to the purpose of the prereading writing activity. The essay test answers were scored according to their primary trait which involved "the relevance of the answer to the essay question" and the "content of the answer" (Lloyd-Jones, 1977, p. 42).

Reading Selections

Three reading selections were chosen for use in the experiment. The three selections progressed in level of difficulty as measured by readability formulae. They also represented the types of discourse that are commonly treated in the reading classes, expository or informational discourse and persuasion.

The first selection was Isaac Asimov's "UFOs," which appeared in the textbook Improving College Reading (Jacobus, 1978, pp.65-70). The essay is difficult for students in several ways. The selection presents in a "pro" and "con" format logical reasons for and against believing that a civilization from another planet is trying to contact Earth. Asimov marshalls a variety of reasons for both sides of the argument. As soon as he presents one side of the issue, he immediately answers with counterbalancing arguments; students seem to find this lack of a stance disconcerting. In addition, Asimov cites large numbers in discussing the number of planets in the galaxy, galaxies in the universe, and light years of travel involved, and the notion of statistical probability is often foreign to students. But probably the main difficulty for students is the sheer number of reasons that Asimov discusses in a relatively short essay. The burden, then, for the students is basically one of literal comprehension: to realize, by picking up specific verbal cues mapped in the surface structure, that Asimov provides support for two sides of an argument and to take in and retain a

number of the arguments listed.

The writing assignment which the experimental group received to prepare them for this first reading applied the role-playing method most literally. The assignment was a direct attempt to foreshadow both the form and content of the Asimov essay:

> Write an in-class paper of about one page discussing the possibility that reported UFOs are sent from other planets. Include at least two reasons for and two reasons against believing that UFOs exist.

The purpose of the first writing assignment was to enable students to improve their retention by attempting to role-play the author in both organization and content, using their own experiences. Accordingly, the essay question created for the reading simply asked students to list Asimov's pro and con arguments:

> List the "pro" reasons the author used in favor of believing that UFOs come from other planets. List the "con" reasons the author used against believing in the existence of UFOs from space.

The essay question was scored by awarding a point for each argument listed.

The second reading was "When Television Is a School for Criminals" by Grant Hendricks, which was also from Improving College Reading (Jacobus, 1978, pp. 159-167). The essay purports to be informational but has definite emotional appeal. It is a first-person account of a survey done by an inmate of a maximum-security

prison on the influence of watching television on convicts. As an insider, Hendricks interviewed one-third of the inmates of Marquette Prison in Michigan about why they watched television in their cells. Most of the men interviewed reported that they got ideas for crimes and learned new techniques from the variety of shows that they view. Hendricks lists a series of narrative examples of how criminals were inspired to crime by television episodes.

Students usually grasp the basic theme of the essay quite readily. However, their usual conclusion is that television is bad for people or that prisons should be punishing criminals instead of entertaining them. We hoped that a prereading writing exercise would prepare students to move from that emotional reaction toward a more considered and elaborated conclusion.

Since one of the basic premises of the essay is that television is a motivational force for people, the discussion questions used by the instructors were aimed at examining that assumption:

> Do people learn anything from TV? What? Is television a good or a bad influence?

The role-playing method was adapted to fashion the writing assignment for the second reading. The discussion questions were transferred into a writing mode in terms of the students' own experiences, and the prereading writing assignment for the experimental group was:

> Write an in-class paper of about one page discussing whether watching television has been good or bad for

you or for people that you know. Include at least three examples in your paper.

Directing the student to use examples as support presaged the organization of the ensuing reading.

Instead of an emotional condemnation, it was hoped that consideration of the influences of television viewing would broaden the students' perspective and enable them to view the reading selection as providing an example of a negative influence on one predisposed population group. The essay question devised asked students to demonstrate a movement beyond the emotion reaction:

> Suggest several ways that television could be used to be a good influence on prisoners.

The essay question was scored by awarding a point for each way suggested.

The third reading selection was an editorial (reprinted in Pigott, 1980), chosen to represent persuasive discourse. Written before her assassination, the editorial concerned Indira Gandhi. It presented Gandhi in very negative terms and was clearly one-sided.

Students have a particularly difficult time with this type of reading. They tend to read as though they are reading for information and do not recognize bias. They simply accept as fact that Indira Gandhi was a ruthless tyrant. Part of the problem also stems from the students' inexperience. They are often unaware of world events and world figures, and they can be expected to know very little

about Gandhi. The prereading discussion sought to point out to students that newspapers and magazines include opinions as well as facts and to draw a parallel between a world leader who was unknown to them and one who was very familiar. The instructors used the following discussion questions with all groups:

> What is an editorial? How does it differ from a news story? Does anyone know anything about Indira Gandhi of India? Who is her counterpart here in the United States? Would you say that President Reagan is a controversial figure? Do some people approve and some disapprove of him and his actions? What are some pros and cons about him and/or his policies?

The prereading writing assignment for the experimental group asked students to vary their perspective and assume two opposing roles. They were in effect asked to write two "mini-editorials" expressing two different opinions about the head of state of their own country:

> Write a paragraph in which you condemn President Reagan and his actions or policies. Then write another paragraph as though you approve of those same characteristics and policies.

The essay question for all students asked them to analyze the techniques that the author had used to lead readers and to speculate

about how Gandhi could have been presented in a more even-handed manner:

> Explain how the author of the editorial led the reader to condemn Indira Gandhi. How could he have presented Mrs. Gandhi in a positive or a neutral way?

In summary, the prereading writing assignments cast students in the role of author, attempting to structure their own thoughts and experiences in a particular situation. The role-playing technique was adapted to address the reading problem unique to each reading selection. The essay test question for each reading attempted to test whether the role-playing writing exercise had accomplished its goal.

Findings

An alternate form of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test was administered at the end of the semester. An analysis of the results revealed that the gains made by the experimental group, which had done the writing exercises, were not significantly greater than those of the control group.

Insert Table 1 about here

However, the measures utilized to gauge comprehension of the individual readings did indicate several areas in which experimental students excelled. For the first reading, Asimov's "UFOs,"

the experimental students were more successful than the control group in answering inference questions, and their scores on the retention measure approached statistical significance.

Insert Table 2 about here

For all three readings, the experimental group exceeded the control group in answering the essay test questions.

Insert Table 3 about here

To summarize, the experimental students were more successful than the control group in the first reading when their writing experience had been the most structured. They had written imitating both form and content in anticipation of the reading. For all three readings, the experimental students wrote essays with more content than the control group had written.

Discussion

The results of the study indicated several benefits of using the role-playing, prereading exercise. The method does appear to help students comprehend a reading. The exercise was most successful in preparing students to read the first assignment, the Asimov essay. This essay was factual and informational and had the lowest readability level. The students were asked to imitate form and content most

closely. Perhaps the role-playing method is most effective in this context for underprepared students.

The prereading writing activity also holds another advantage for teachers. It offers an opportunity to discover what information and preconceptions students bring to a reading. For example, the prereading assignment for the Asimov essay had asked students to discuss the reasons for and against believing that UFOs exist. Although the assignment had not asked for an opinion and had asked for discussion on both sides of the issue, most students took a "pro" or "con" stance. Perhaps their tendency to view issues one-dimensionally explains why Asimov's structure seems especially difficult for them to read.

The prereading writing assignment for the second reading identified a definite preconception about television among students. When asked how television had influenced them or people whom they knew, the majority judged television positively and wrote about the ability of television programming to entertain, inform,and educate. This strong preconception would help explain why students react so strongly when they encounter television being "misused" by the convicts referred to in the second reading.

The most pressing problem inherent in a reading selection is often related to its aim or purpose. The writing assignments can be structured to help students focus on the aim. For example, the first reading of the study was informative and the writing assignment

was geared to predispose students to notice and retain literal information. The second reading was also informational but included persuasive elements and elicited an emotional response, and the writing assignment sought to prepare students to make considered judgments while being influenced by the emotional appeal. The third reading was persuasive and the writing assignment had students view an issue from different perspectives to heighten students' awareness of an author's process of selection.

The success that the experimental students experienced in answering the essay questions argues for measuring comprehension in a variety of ways. Perhaps the essay questions tapped a different type of comprehension than that tested by objective questions. For example, in answering the question for the Asimov selection, students structured their own comprehension instead of replying to a test-maker's prompts. In addition, the essay questions for the second and third readings were not as text-specific; the answers depended upon the information and evaluative skills of the student. The fact that the students who accomplished the role-playing writings were more successful in answering these questions argues that the exercise may be useful in developing the higher-level critical reading skills.

Finally, the role-playing exercise provides students with an opportunity to write that leaves the student free and under no pressure

to produce writing for a grade. Teachers, too, can simply allow students to write and not feel compelled to grade results according to traditional composition criteria.

In summary, the role-playing experience can be used to prepare students to encounter a reading. It can identify students' preconceptions and be focused to address the problems of aim in a reading selection. The method also provides an opportunity for students to practice writing in an unpressured setting. It is, therefore, a useful tool in an integrated reading-writing curriculum.

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Author Notes

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Table 1

Differences in NELSON-DENNY Pretest-Posttest Gains

Breakdown	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	1.335	1	1.335	0.456
Within Groups	187.481	64	2.929	

Table 2

Inferences for "UFOs"

Breakdown	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	4.799	1	4.799	10.115 *
Within Groups	30.367	64	0.474	

* $p < .05$

Table 3

Three Essay Questions

Breakdown	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F
Between Groups	128.360	1	128.360	14.553 *
Within Groups	564.503	64	8.820	

$p < .05$